

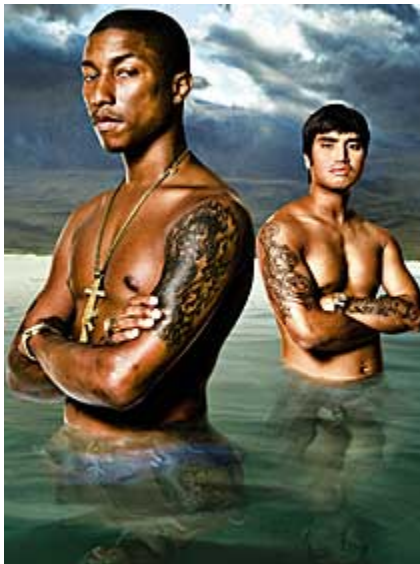
NSBE Tech Corner | Superproducers

They're reinventing the sound of music. And the music industry.

Producers used to live on the B-side of the music business: behind the scenes. They were masters of the mixes that pushed pop songs up the charts, but still slaves to the rhythms of record labels and fickle divas. Yet, while file-sharing hogs the headlines in music's digital evolution, there's been a quiet revolution in the studio, where the music gets made.

The tools of professional sound production keep getting faster, cheaper, and smaller. The time-honored, king-sized mixing station is now a luxury item reserved for sonic chauvinists, and even the industry-standard Pro Tools is getting squeezed from below by pure desktop systems. As youngblood and old-school producers alike are finding out, the new technology means creative freedom, a chance to dance to the beat of a different drum machine, to sample sounds from around the world and back through time.

Now the production wizards themselves are rising up from the digital underground, armed with unlimited content and unprecedented control. Their trademark styles attract a growing parade of pop singers eager for a piece of the new sound. And so a generation is stepping out of the shadows to rule the record industry: They're hitmakers and powerbrokers, and their names have moved from the liner notes to the front of their own albums. They're the new rock stars. Meet the Superproducers.



Sacha Waldman
The Neptunes

THE NEPTUNES

Street Cred: Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo redefined the sound of early millennium pop music, bringing a distinctly digital funk to both hip hop (Nelly's "Hot in Herre," Jay-Z's "Nigga Please") and the pop charts (Britney's "I'm a Slave 4 U," half of Justin Timberlake's solo debut). Even N.E.R.D., the duo's own side project, scored a gold album.

What's next: They recently released *The Neptunes Present Clones*, a compilation of tracks from Busta Rhymes, Ludacris, and new acts on their StarTrak label.

Behind the music: "Some people like the recordings from 50 years ago, because they embodied so much warmth and thickness," says Williams. "But the reason they have that sound is

because the technology wasn't as good as it is now. The tools people use today give you actuality, and that's going to sound thinner. For us, it's what feels right."

What they owe to marketing: "We just try to create a name brand," says Hugo. "When we were young, we were a band - the multicultural Earth, Wind & Fire with hip hop and a little bit of rock. We kept that chain of thinking as far as the imaging.

It has helped us, yeah."
- Robert Levine



Sacha Waldman
Nigel Godrich

NIGEL GODRICH

Street Cred: Godrich produced Radiohead's last four albums and Beck's *Sea Change* and *Mutations*.

What's next: He just finished work on Air's new album. "Usually they do everything themselves - they're a home-studio band," Godrich says. "We met through mutual friends and got on well. I had some ideas and offered some guidance and direction."

Behind the music: "Now that production technology is available to anyone with a laptop, you can do things that a decade ago would've required thousands of pounds' worth of gear" - not that it's made music any better. "I hate this fascination with technology. I don't read those magazines." Gulp.

What he learned from Machiavelli: "Producing is diplomacy: If you have an idea you really want to

follow, sometimes you need to trick them into doing it. You have to be political and shrewd and cunning."

- Bill Werde



Ian White
The Matrix

THE MATRIX

Street Cred: Scott Spock (far left) and husband-and-wife team Graham Edwards and Lauren Christy all but created Avril Lavigne, writing and producing half the songs on the artist's 15 million-selling debut, including "Sk8er Boi," "I'm With You," and "Complicated." The trio also worked on songs for Liz Phair, Christina Aguilera, Nick Carter, and Hillary Duff.

What's next: They're producing New York garage rockers Mooney Suzuki and writing songs for their own album.

Behind the music: Pro Tools is "the most amazing program ever created," says Spock, particularly because it lets them show ideas to artists so quickly. "Especially if it's a 16-year-old," says Christy, "you don't want to say, 'Hang on while we redo this.'"

Are producers the new record labels? Sometimes. "We find direction for the artist a lot of the time," says Christy. Adds Edwards: "I think that's what's brought producers more to the forefront - they're a big factor in repertoire, the 'R' in 'A&R.'"

- R.L.



Sacha Waldman
Timbaland

TIMBALAND

Street Cred: Tim "Timbaland" Mosley introduced drum and bass skitter beats and Punjabi sounds into pop and hip hop. He produced just about every hit from Missy Elliot ("Work It," "Get Ur Freak On," "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)"), most by Aaliyah (after she parted ways with R. Kelly), and some by others, including Justin Timberlake and Ginuwine.

What's next: He'll soon release *Under Construction, Part II*, which he recorded as an artist with partner Magoo. His Beat Club label just put out *Deliverance* by Bubba Sparxxx, which Timbaland produced, and he's hard at work on the next Missy Elliot project, which he hopes to have out by the end of the year.

Behind the music: His longtime engineer uses Pro Tools, but "it's cheating," Timbaland says. "Anyone can do a song now."

Why he gets respect: "When I hear a Timbaland song," says Pharrell Williams of the Neptunes, "it makes me want to work harder."

- R.L.



F. Scott Schafer
DFA

DFA

Street Cred: On the Rapture's club smash "House of Jealous Lovers," James Murphy (left) and Tim Goldsworthy, formerly of trip hop supergroup Unkle, introduced rock to electronic music out on the dance floor.

What's next: "House" brought big-league interest to DFA's small Manhattan studio: The duo spent a day producing a track with Britney Spears. It also just finished updating the dance-punk sound of the early '80s for Radio 4's new album, *Gotham*.

Behind the music: "Our attraction to equipment has a lot to do with the way it looks," says Goldsworthy. "You're surrounded by this stuff all the time." Aside from a Macintosh G4 and a sequencer, DFA uses mostly predigital gear. But technology still plays a role in shaping the pair's signature sound.

"Thank God," says Goldsworthy, "for eBay."

Production is 10 percent technology and 90 percent psychology, says Goldsworthy. "It's very much about understanding the reasoning of the band members."

- B.W.



Mike Ruiz
Dan The Automator

DAN THE AUTOMATOR

Street Cred: When Dan "the Automator" Nakamura teamed up with rapper Kool Keith on the 1996 critical favorite *Dr. Octagon*, his loping rhythms and sampled strings sounded so fresh that British label Mo'Wax released an instrumental version of the album. As the Gorillaz - a band putatively made up of cartoon characters - Nakamura, Kid Koala, Blur's Damon Albarn, and some of their friends made one of the strangest multi-platinum albums ever.

What's next: He just finished *Omakase*, his major label solo debut, which includes contributions from Albarn and Koala.

Behind the music: Nakamura gets new sounds from obscure old equipment. ("The Telefunken U47 is one of the greatest mikes ever made.") "I used to sample old records," he says. "Now I sample old gear."

On the separation of powers: "Hopefully, producing is a collaboration between myself and the artist. In hip hop you end up doing more, though - I do the track and they do the rhyme."

- B.W.



Jasper James
Felix Da Housecat

FELIX DA HOUSECAT

Street Cred: Felix Stallings Jr. has deep roots in the house music scene - he learned from Chicago master DJ Pierre and released the club hit "Phantasy Girl" when he was just 15. Stallings' 2001 album *Kittenz* and *Thee Glitz* helped spark the electro renaissance, and he received a Grammy nomination for his remix of Rinoceros's "Lost Love."

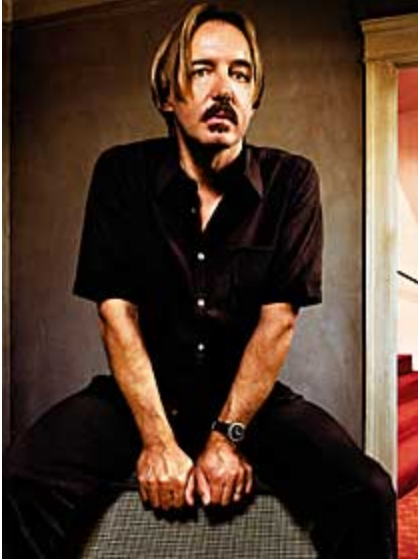
What's next: He's producing tracks for P. Diddy's upcoming dance album. So far the songs he's worked on are "straight-up acid house and not very commercial."

Behind the music: "I think he's tripped out that I don't need an engineer," he says of P. Diddy. Since Stallings started working with Pro Tools, mixes that used to take two days now take two hours. Sometimes he still works analog, though: "I'm tired

of that too-clear sound."

How producers became superstars: "Now people know who did what. It's like when Michael Jordan came into the NBA. Moses Malone was just as good, but he didn't have marketing behind him."

- B.W.



Sacha Waldman
Butch Vig

BUTCH VIG

Street Cred: Vig smoothed out the rough edges to let Nirvana's *Nevermind* define a generation, and worked on Sonic Youth's *Dirty* and the Smashing Pumpkins' *Gish* and *Siamese Dream*. More recently, he helped bring another ragtag sound into the Top 10 with AFI's *Sing the Sorrow*.

What's next: He's putting together several tracks for "Feminem" Jessy Moss, his first hip hop act, and writing songs for the fourth album by his own band, Garbage.

Behind the music: For a guy known mostly for grunge, Vig does more digitally than you might expect - he sometimes finishes remixes on his laptop when he's on a plane. "Pro Tools has definitely changed the way you work creatively. You can go in and say, 'Should this be the intro?' It gives you so

much flexibility." Sometimes too much: "When you have unlimited tracks, you end up with 200 to sort through. Somebody has to put their foot down."

Why are certain producers in such demand? "Some of the really talented guys, like the Neptunes, bring something to the process that other people can't. Once you get a name for yourself, the price goes up."

- R.L.

By Robert Levine and Bill Werde